

Next Missile Step Is Deployment

NEW SOVIET BOMBERS DISCLOSED

Associated Press

American officials have learned to their surprise that the Soviet Union is developing three new types of heavy bombers, government sources report.

A Soviet negotiator made the disclosure to American representatives at Geneva during technical talks that preceded last week's signing of the SALT II agreement limiting strategic weapons, said the sources, who asked to remain anonymous.

Previously, U.S. intelligence officials have said the Soviets were working on a single new type of long-range bomber, which they expect to emerge as roughly comparable to the U.S. supersonic B-1 that was canceled by President Carter.

Pentagon officials say they are at a loss to explain why the Russians volunteered information on the bombers being developed, one of which, they said, could carry a cruise missile.

"It took our folks by surprise," said one U.S. government source.

According to Carter administration sources, neither Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev, Defense Minister Dimitri Ustinov nor any other senior Soviet official mentioned development of the three new heavy bombers at the Vienna summit talks.

THE RUSSIANS in Geneva apparently did not provide much specific information about the three new aircraft or their intended missions. None has yet been test-flown, so far as U.S. officials know. They would be a generation more advanced than the U.S. subsonic B-52.

The newest Soviet bomber in operation, the swing-winged Backfire, was a center of hard bargaining between U.S. and Soviet negotiators.

The American military contended the Backfire could be used against the United States with refueling during flight or at intermediate bases. But the Russians insisted it is a medium-range bomber and they do not intend to give it an intercontinental reach.

In the end, U.S. and Soviet diplomats agreed on a separate statement outside the SALT treaty. In that statement the Russians pledged they "will not increase the radius of action of this airplane in such a way as to enable it to strike targets on the territory of the U.S.A."

Any bombers that are clearly intercontinental in range would fall within limits defined in the new treaty, officials said.

The new types of Soviet heavy bombers under development are not expected to be ready for combat until the mid-1980s, about the time SALT II will run out.

THE UNITED STATES hopes to negotiate a SALT III treaty by then, substantially reducing nuclear weapons below SALT II levels.

But the difficulty in working out the recently signed agreement has made some U.S. military officers — who are not happy about the Backfire solution — question whether the Russians would yield much on any new heavy bombers they develop and produce.

Sources said the Russians may not necessarily decide to build all three new types, but they believe the Soviets will pick at least one to replace their aging Bear and Bison bombers.

Meanwhile, the United States is carrying on only limited long-range planning and development work looking toward a possible advanced intercontinental bomber.